

Love Like Ghosts

irhinoceri

Star Wars - All Media Types / Star Wars Episode III:
Revenge of the Sith

Complete



Love Like Ghosts

irhinoceri

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by [FicLab](#) v1.0.101 on May 26th, 2024, based on content retrieved from archiveofourown.org/works/10464132.

The content in this book is copyrighted by [irrhinoceri](#) or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on March 27th, 2017, and was last updated on March 27th, 2017.

FicLab ID: SBRuA8lQ/lwnfr4fv/Bwf00C5S

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Copyright Information](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Summary](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)

Summary

title Love Like Ghosts
author irhinoceri
source <https://archiveofourown.org/works/10464132>
published March 27th, 2017
updated March 27th, 2017
words 11,518
chapters 6
status Complete
rating Teen And Up Audiences
Anakin Skywalker | Darth Vader, Complete, Dysfunctional Family, Dysfunctional Relationships, Empress Padmé Amidala, Everybody Lives, Except Sheev, Leia Organa, Lord Huron Lyrics, Luke Skywalker, Mara Jade, Obi-Wan Kenobi, POV Padmé, Padmé Amidala, Padmé Amidala Lives, Padmé Amidala/Anakin Skywalker, Padmé Amidala/Darth Vader, Star Wars - All Media Types / Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith

Description:

Padmé does not die in childbirth and instead returns to Anakin's side in hopes of overthrowing Palpatine. But she has a secret that could destroy them. An Empress Padmé / Vaderdala AU.

Chapter 1

*Yes I know that love is like ghosts
Few have seen it, but everybody talks
Spirits follow everywhere I go
They sing all day and they haunt me in the night*

“The child?”

Padmé put a hand over her flat, empty midsection. “Dead,” she said, coldness in her voice and her heart. She emptied her mind of all thoughts of Leia, and Luke, their tiny faces and the sweet smell of their newborn flesh. Just as Obi-Wan had taught her. “It was a girl. Stillborn. *You* killed her, when you choked me, when you choked the life out of me, it was her life you stole.”

The black mask turned away from her.

“I didn’t... I could never...”

“Kill your own child? But you could kill other children with ease. Why not your own?”

“I didn’t want this to happen.”

“Would it have been better if I had died? Was that what you were trying to do?”

“No! I... I didn’t mean to hurt you. I... I lost myself. I lost my temper. The Dark Side is powerful. I have not yet learned to master it. The Jedi never taught me how to use my anger, not like the Sith. It... I... I lost control. It will not happen again.”

The giant before her was still the boy who had cried out that it was *all Obi-Wan’s fault* when things went wrong.

“Do not bother with apologies. I should have known it would come to this. I should have known that you were a monster all along, masquerading as a good person.” She had no idea if these words hurt him, or not. He was impossible to read behind his wall of black. “After what you did to the Sand People, how you attacked Rush Clovis... it was all there for me to see. Your cruelty.”

“Yes I am a monster,” he said, harshly, proudly, sweeping his cape around his shoulders as if it would protect him from her scorn. “I am surprised that you returned, Senator. Have you brought Obi-Wan with you? Is he lurking somewhere behind you, waiting to finish what he began?”

“No. Obi-Wan is long gone. I don’t know where he is, so don’t even bother trying to get it out of me.”

He shook one fisted hand. "If I ever see him again, I'll kill him."

"Will you tear the galaxy apart looking for him?"

The fist relaxed and he shook his head. "I will do whatever my master instructs."

She bit back a bitter laugh. "Your master? Is that what you are calling the Chancellor now?"

"He is the Emperor."

"I am well aware."

"Padmé..."

He stepped towards her, then, and reached out one black gloved hand to touch her face. The touch was surprisingly gentle, like the ghost of Anakin's tender caresses. She shut her eyes and breathed in, feeling the leather clad fingers trace the outline of her jaw. His hand rested, heavily now, upon her neck. He could crush her, here or from across the room, she knew, and she forced herself to look up into the red lenses over his eyes without fear.

"Our marriage is over. You ended it when you hurt me. When you killed our child."

He dropped his hand to his side. "Then why did you come back?"

"You are still my husband. Even if our love is dead... the vows I made mean something to me. And you owe me. I've come to collect what is due to me."

She did not know if he believed her. She wasn't sure that she believed herself. He cocked his head to the side.

"I don't know what I can give you besides death. My death. Is that what you have come for, Padmé?"

Her name sounded wrong through the vocabulator, wrong spoken from the monstrous black mask. Wrong.

She would have to do something about that.

"Take off your mask."

"I cannot."

"I want to see your face."

"What you see is what I am, now. What Obi-Wan made of me."

She reached up, up, up and put her hands on either side of the black plastoid helmet. She searched with her fingers for a latch as he made no move or noise save for the steady mechanical breathing.

She lifted off the heavy cowl and set it aside. There was still another part concealing his face and she carefully detached it, hearing the pop of the seal as she lifted it away from the base. His neck and jaw was still covered by the lower half of the apparatus, but she saw him.

Gone was the angry young man she had last seen as her consciousness faded on Mustafar. Gone was the handsome, earnest young man she had married in haste and loved in secret for

four war ravaged years.

In his place was a scarred mess of ghost white flesh. All his hair was burned off and deep, angry grooves ran along his skull and across his cheekbone. The eyes that looked at her were yellow, though as he stared at her for a long, silent moment, they faded to a pale and sickly blue.

But it was Anakin. Of that there was no mistake.

“Obi-Wan did this to you?”

He nodded slightly. His breath was a shuddering wheeze, although the respirator at his lips still kept him supplied with adequate air, for the time being. There were less cruel ways to aid in his survival, than the sarcophagus Palpatine had sealed him into. Already her mind was spinning with alternatives, better options to tend to the grievous wounds Obi-Wan and the fires of Mustafar had inflicted, but that would have to wait.

“You offered me control of the galaxy,” she said. “You claimed that you could overthrow the Emperor and that we could rule. Side by side.”

He looked down, sucking feebly at the air supplied to him from his half-mask. “That was before... all this,” he said, his voice a burned out whisper, the bravado of the vocabulator’s baritone gone now.

“I want him dead. If you cannot fight him, there are other ways. We will do it together.”

“And then? Will it be my turn to feel the wrath of your justice? To pay for my crimes?”

She hesitated for a moment, silent, and then reached out to touch his head, tracing the lines of the ugly gashes along his head and under his eye, circling the mangled lump that was all that remained of his right ear. He closed his eyes and she knew, somehow, that this was the first human touch he had received in months. All that time he had been alone with what had become of Palpatine, their old friend, a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

He pushed her hand away and backed up, abruptly. “Don’t pity me,” he said.

Padmé wondered what would be in her heart if the twins were truly dead, if her children were but ashes scattered to the wind. Would she hate him then? Could she hate him? She locked down her feelings, her memories of her infants, the last she had seen of their faces, and clenched her hands into fists.

“You would be lucky to die at my hand,” she said. “You *are* pitiful, Anakin. You did this to yourself. You did this to us. Blame Obi-Wan all you want, but I blame you.”

This seemed, perversely, what he wanted. She saw it in the way he lowered his eyes, not in anger or shame, but relief. This is what he felt he deserved and what he desired. Her scorn. Her reproach. Had he craved her hatred and censure all these months, even as he had been searching for her? Well, here she was. She would run and hide no longer. And she would give him what he wanted, what he expected. No more, and no less.

Chapter 2

*Yes I know that love is like ghosts
And the moonlight baby shows you what's real
There ain't a language for the things I feel
And if I can't have you then no one ever will*

“She is not your daughter.”

“I know.”

She had lived the lie that their children were dead for so long now that sometimes she even forgot that it was not true. In order to shield her mind and her emotions from his formidable senses, she had to believe it. She had to feel the resentment and the hatred that such a thing would create, and it ate at her. It ate away at her soul, and underneath it all was the pain of knowing that she had given up her children to save them, to protect them, and that they were lost to her because of the choice she had made.

The choice to return to him.

To a man who was not fit to be a father.

She had to lied to him, to the Emperor, to herself. All because she could not risk his temper, his uncontrollable dark side, being unleashed on their children. Or worse, infecting them, turning them to darkness and destroying their innocence.

And now this girl, the Emperor's pet.

He doted on her as if she were the child he thought he had killed, and Padmé could not stand to see it.

They had found her after the Emperor's death.

All his power in the Dark Side was no match for the poison Padmé had slowly administered, via the food served to him by his personal droids. All his precautions, his paranoia, his privacy, was no match for her determination.

It took her a long time to find the means to circumvent his security measures. But she was patient. She had all the time in the world.

He had called her *my dear* and told her how *very glad* he was that she had decided to join Lord Vader by his side. So glad that she had come to see that his was the only way to bring peace and stability to the galaxy.

She thought there was hatred and mistrust behind all his words of endearment, just as there always had been. But now she saw him for the wolf he was. Now it was her turn to deceive.

When he was so weakened that he could barely even lift his hands to shoot the dreaded Force lightning, Anakin had driven a lightsaber through his heart.

She thought she would be happier.

But in the time it took to bring the Emperor to his knees, years had passed. Her revenge was a slow one. It had required placing herself by the Emperor's side, being his favorite adviser, and by playing the part so well she had lost something of herself along the way.

How glad I am that my favorite political protégé should be by my side, just as my apprentice fulfills my dreams for the Sith. My legacy is truly complete.

My only regret is that the child was lost. How formidable a family we would have been. And how sad I am that there can be no more children, my dear. How sad for you.

The girl they found after Palpatine's death was of indeterminate age—no more than 5, somewhat older than 3. She was around the same age that the twins would be now. She said her name was Mara and that the Emperor had taken her from her family, and that the Force had told her to go with him. And no, she didn't know anything more, except that she was the Emperor's favorite, that he had told her so.

"There is no more Emperor now, child," said Padmé. "There is only me."

And it was true.

The Empire was hers. There was no one to stand in her way.

She had dreamed of bringing back democracy, of taking the Emperor's place only to ensure that no one else stepped in to fill the void and abuse the power. She saw herself as a figurehead who allowed the elected leaders, a new chancellor, an empowered senate, to bring back the ways of the Republic in practice if not in name.

She threw herself into her work, into taking care of the galaxy, of presiding over the government to make sure that the corruption which had plagued the Republic did not now flourish in the Imperial Senate. She was hailed as Empress Amidala, beloved by all, but there was also fear in their hearts. She knew this. Fear because of the Empress's consort, the mysterious and implacable Lord Vader.

He was the dark shadow that loomed behind her throne, the implied threat behind all her words, and Padmé knew that this was not the freedom she had once believed in. But it was the deal she had made, the offer she had accepted, and the life she had chosen.

It had to be worth it.

She had to believe that the galaxy was better this way. If she remained in charge, no one like Palpatine could take over and spread darkness again. If Lord Vader only raised his hand in violence at her behest, nothing like the massacre of the Jedi would ever happen again.

The girl, the child Mara, was now always at Anakin's side. It was clear to Padmé that he saw in her the daughter he might have had if he had stayed his hand on Mustafar.

A second chance.

And he would offer her forward like a peace offering, like he thought that this child of the Emperor's choosing could fill the void in Padmé's life that her dead child had left. A replacement.

"She is not your daughter."

"I know."

"She is not my daughter."

"I know. But you will need an heir."

"Are you making plans for my demise? So soon?"

Fire smoldered in his eyes at her words, at her refusal to care for Mara as a surrogate daughter. And, she thought, because she would not forgive him. He wanted that forgiveness, for her to wipe away all thought of the Jedi Purge, to lay aside memories of Mustafar, to finally relax her scorn and become the kind angel she had once been.

But that Padmé is dead.

She died on Mustafar, with an invisible hand around her neck.

And yet, she showed him great care. She had exhausted the width and breadth of galactic medical knowledge for his sake. All the doctors and medical droids in the galaxy could not heal him fully, but she was sure that he was better off than he ever would have been with the Emperor's hand on him.

In fact, she had warred with the Emperor, even as she had been slowly poisoning him, to make sure that Anakin had decent medical care. He kept trying to convince her that nothing more could be done for Lord Vader, all the while Padmé insisted on more skin grafts and operations and the development of better respiratory aides and more effective pain relief.

Palpatine wanted Anakin to be lost to pain, a prisoner of his life support suit, with uncomfortable malfunctioning limbs. He wanted Anakin to be cut off from the world and immune to her touch.

The Emperor had tried to have her killed many times. Even as he smiled to her face and expressed his unending joy with her "strong presence" in the Imperial Palace, he sent assassins after her and sought to undermine her in Anakin's eyes. Padmé might have laughed at his attempts to convince Anakin that she was having affairs, or building a rebellion, or plotting their deaths.

Once before he had managed to erode Anakin's trust in her. But now his attempts were pitiful, futile things. He was too afraid of Anakin's loyalty to Padmé to ever attack her outright, accuse her outright of betrayal, or kill her with his own hands. He had nothing on her, no proof of consorting with other men or meeting with enemies.

Palpatine had never happened upon the one truth that could have won him his bitter war against her, his favorite daughter, his beloved protégé. The fact that her children were alive was a truth too well hidden even for his desperately probing mind.

She had buried her motherhood on Polis Massa and relinquished her children.

That part of her was dead.

And now the Emperor was dead, but she could not resurrect herself.

The revelation of the lie would destroy her. It would destroy them.

She thought of it often, and when she did she felt crush of Vader's hands around her neck, half imagined, half a memory of Mustafar. She was sure that this would be her final fate if he discovered the truth. And then what would become of her children? What would become of Anakin? What would become of the galaxy?

"She is not your daughter."

"I know."

"What do you expect of her? To kill us one day, the way we killed Palpatine?"

"She would never do that."

"Are you sure? And why not?"

"She loves me like a father. She would love you like a mother, if you let her."

"You are not her father. I am not her mother."

"She has no one else."

"Then she has no one."

"She is just a child."

"That has never been enough to earn your pity and reprieve before. If I told you to kill her, would you?"

"You would never ask me to do such a thing."

"But if I did."

"You wouldn't."

I wasn't an answer. It wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no, either.

She watched the young junior senator from Alderaan from a distance, feeling as if her heart was being crushed under the weight of her sadness.

But she also felt pride. Her broken heart soared to see Leia now.

The girl, almost a young woman, was everything she could have hoped her to be, and more.

The way she argued for justice and freedom in the Imperial Senate transported Padmé back to her girlhood, when she had been a young Queen and believed so strongly in the power of what was good and right.

She hoped that Princess Leia Organa never lost that idealism or purity. She was a vision in a white Alderaanian gown, and Padmé thought, *It has all been worth it. My daughter is safe, and the darkness will never touch her.*

The first time she met her grown up daughter in person was at a formal state dinner held in honor of new senate appointees. It made Padmé tremble, for all of them to be in the same room—her, Leia, and Anakin. He was there, of course, because he was always in attendance when Empress Amidala made these public appearances. He trusted no one else to be her personal bodyguard.

He always wore a mask in public. All the bacta in the galaxy could not restore his face to what it had been, or make his hair grow back, and he seemed to feel a curious aversion to showing the public his true identity. Perhaps it had nothing to do with vanity, and everything to do with personal shame for the things he had done. In any event, Padmé, Mara, select droids, and medical personnel were the only ones who ever saw Lord Vader unmasked.

It often frustrated Padmé, since his fearsome appearance in the mask made him seem less like a consort and more like a brutal enforcer, which he was, it was true, but she did not like how the HoloNet talked about him, as if he were a bogeyman she kept on a leash. It painted her as a Palpatinesque despot, when she was trying so hard to steer the galaxy in the right direction, bringing justice and order to the Empire rather than tyranny and control. Slavers, criminals, and warlords were encouraged to fear her wrath... but not a room full of junior senators trying to enjoy a banquet in their honor. This they could not do without feeling the icy stare and ominous breathing of Lord Vader as he watched them all.

His little red-headed step-child didn't help matters any. She strutted around like she owned the world, and she loved nothing more than dressing up to be the center of attention at a formal gathering. Anakin still insisted on filling her head with the notion that she was Padmé's heir apparent, and that all of this would be hers one day, the galaxy in her hands. He taught her everything he knew of the Force, the teachings of the Jedi and of the Sith, and kept trying to get Padmé to mentor her in politics.

Padmé thought her a spoiled and foolish child. She wondered if, had Anakin raised Leia, she would have turned out the same way. Always trying too hard, desperate to please her father.

She would not have wished for Leia to be sent to Coruscant like this, where she was put directly into possible contact with her father, but Padmé had given up control of Leia long ago. She had ceded her infant girl to Bail Organa, handing her over into his arms, as he swore to her that she would be loved, cared for, protected.

She knew she had to think of Leia as their daughter, now. Bail and Brea. It was their decision to encourage Leia to enter the senate as a precursor to her destined future as the Queen of Alderaan and head of the Royal House of Organa. It was a logical decision. Serving in the senate as Princess was the ideal way to learn about the larger galaxy and the way various governments worked. It would make her a better person. It would make her a better Queen.

She feared that meeting Leia in person would trigger some sort of Jedi Force Sense in Anakin, and that everything would be revealed. But it seemed she need not have worried; he didn't give any indication that this year's crop of new senators was any more interesting to

him than previous ones, and he did not bother speaking to any of them unless they approached him first, which so rarely happened as to be shocking when it did.

After dinner, when the guests were left to mingle over drinks, Padmé stood amidst an attentive crowd, and told herself that she would not pay Leia special attention. She would avoid even standing near her, as seeing them side by side might open Anakin's eyes to the uncanny resemblance. Surely he, who was always so attuned to her moods, could sense right now how unusually nervous she was, and would be searching around for who or what had unsettled her. He stood only a few feet away, ready to lurch out and strike anyone who made the wrong move.

Even though she tried not to stare in Leia's direction all night, she could not help but notice that Mara seemed to be targeting the Alderaanian princess specifically. She had her cornered and stood there talking to her, laughing and gesturing, holding a drink glass nonchalantly. This had been going on for a while. Padmé narrowed her eyes.

"It looks like Mara has made a new friend," said the low rumble of Anakin's artificial voice behind her.

She stiffened. "So it would seem."

"You disapprove."

"Mara's friendships do not concern me. Though I do not see why she should be so interested in a senator. I thought your hatred of politicians had rubbed off on her."

He hooked his thumbs through his belt and rocked back a little, saying with a thoughtful air, "That girl she's speaking to reminds me of you, at that age. Perhaps Mara sees it too, and is drawn to her. Someone like you to give her the attention she has always craved."

Padmé turned around to give him an irritated glare. "Leave the psychoanalysis to therapy droids," she said. Then she set her glass down with a hard clank. "I'm tired. I think I've had enough rubbing elbows with the senate for tonight."

"As you wish, Milady," he said, and she was sure that there was sarcasm in his voice. He followed her dutifully, leaving Mara to her new found friend. Padmé's hands shook as she shrugged into a travelling cloak, fumbling with the clasps, but Anakin said nothing, his breathing behind the mask steady and slow.

Chapter 3

*I don't feel it till it hurts sometimes
So go on baby hurt me tonight
All the spirits that I know I saw
Do you see no ghost in me at all?*

“Absolutely not.”

“It’s not a request, Your Highness. I have received numerous reports of a growing Jedi collective in the Outer Rim. The time has come to investigate.”

“Investigate what? There is no law against the Jedi gathering together under my Empire,” Padmé said, lifting her chin defiantly. “You know this.”

“You’re being foolish. If the Jedi grow in numbers once again they will move against you,” Anakin insisted, pacing back and forth, his black cloak whipping at his feet in agitation. “Your Empire was built on Palpatine’s Empire, and his Empire was built on the bodies of fallen Jedi. They do not view you in the light of friendship.”

“And how do you know this? Have you been chatting with many Jedi lately?”

The glare she received was withering, but she reiterated, “I am a friend to the Jedi. I will allow them to rebuild their order. I have told you this.”

“You are making a mistake. I cannot protect you if you will not let me silence those who would like to see your rule ended.”

“If the Jedi have anything against me, it is because of you. And if you attack them unprovoked, you will doom whatever goodwill I could hope to build between the Empire and the Jedi remnant. Besides, they are rebuilding their order far from here, outside the province of the Empire. To chase them even to the far edges of the galaxy would be both ruthless and paranoid.”

He made a low, sarcastic bow, and said. “That’s exactly what you keep me around for, my love.”

“This has nothing to do with political safety and everything to do with Obi-Wan.”

He snorted.

“You think that if you seek out the Jedi you will find Obi-Wan among them.”

“It’s likely. The Order was his life.”

“Then this is an entirely personal matter for you.”

“Yes, yes it is. And as a personal matter, I don’t think that I need your approval or permission to pursue it, my darling wife.” He seemed rather proud of himself for twisting that around into justification.

“Do you think that if you kill Obi-Wan, things will be better? That everything will go back to the way it was between us? Is that what you think?”

“No. This has nothing to do with you and me. This is about me and Obi-Wan.”

You cannot split the two issues down the middle and separate them, she thought, but she did not voice it out loud. It was still too tender of a subject, even after all these years. His certainty that she had allied with Obi-Wan against him, had bought his friend to Mustafar to kill him, had never truly gone away. She could swear up and down that it had never been her intention, that Obi-Wan had snuck aboard her ship, and he would pretend to believe her, but it would always come out in the middle of some argument or another. You brought Obi-Wan to kill me and look what he did to me. These accusations were always easy to counter with reminders that he had attacked her, hurt her, killed their child. You left me to die on a platform while you fought Obi-Wan, you cared more about proving you were better than him than making sure that I was alright. It was Obi-Wan who came back for me and cared for me as I went into labor. To which he always said, I would have come back for you except that Obi-Wan cut off all my limbs!

She didn’t want to have that argument again. It went around and around in never ending circles.

Instead, she got up and went over to him, reaching out to steady his agitated movements. She could still calm him, bring him around to see her way of thinking was right, in many regards. “Anakin,” she said, softening her voice, ‘let it go. Forget Obi-Wan. Forget the Jedi, leave them to their own devices.’ She brushed her hands along his neck, curling her fingers near his ears, where his hair had once been. “You have a life here. Don’t throw it away just for revenge.”

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously, and lifted his hands to grip her upper arms and pull her closer. He searched her face for a moment. “There’s something you’re not telling me. Something you’re keeping from me. I can sense it,” he said, and she just stared up into his face, her heart pounding.

She pushed all thoughts of Luke far from her mind—the son she had last seen as a tiny bundle in Obi-Wan’s arms. She choked back the memory of her own tears. The way she had almost lost her nerve, taken him back, vowed to scrap her entire plan so that she could keep her children. But of course she had gone through with it. She was the only one who could get close enough to the Emperor to bring him down.

Now, she locked eyes with her husband and said nothing, refusing to answer his question, because she could not trust herself to speak.

He bent low, drawing near as if he might kiss her, but then he let her go abruptly and turned away.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing in regards to the Jedi, but I’m warning you, this could be your downfall,” he said, putting his back to her. “They are a threat. You cannot just ignore them.”

So it was back to speaking of the Jedi in political terms, then. Pretending that his grudge against Obi-Wan had nothing to do with it.

“I don’t intend to ignore them. But you are the last person I want investigating them,” she said. “I will speak to the Chancellor about sending a diplomatic envoy from the Senate, to discuss their plans and to offer our support and aide. It will be my way of showing them that I do not condone the actions of my predecessor.”

“You should send Mara with this envoy,” said Anakin, glancing at her over his shoulder. “She will represent you and will be able to act as a bodyguard to the diplomatic envoy, in case the Jedi chose to attack.”

“I don’t want my representative to attack the Jedi, that is the entire reason I do not want you to go,” Padmé explained, exasperated. But a part of her was relieved that he had conceded and was making alternate suggestions to going after the Jedi personally.

“I said *if* they attack first,” sighed Anakin. “You may want to be peaceful, but you have to account for the possibility that the Jedi will not.”

“Sending a Sith protégé to treat with the Jedi is a very bad idea.”

“She had been educated in the ways of both the Jedi and the Sith,” he corrected, irritability. ‘If I cannot go myself, I want someone I trust to be my eyes and ears. Put your head together with the Chancellor to come up with whatever group of politicians you wish, but I insist that Mara accompany them.’ He paused, then added, “If I had to guess, I would say Mara will request her friend, the Princess from Alderaan, go as well. And I think it would be good to include her: Alderaan is one of our most peaceful and progressive planets and their support reflects well on your Empire. The Princess’s father, Bail Organa, was known as a friend to the Jedi.”

It took her a moment to compose herself enough to respond. “Thank you,” she said, unable to think of an objection, “for your suggestion. I will see if the Senator from Alderaan is available to be a part of this envoy.”

He nodded, and went to leave the room, but then he paused just before the door and looked back. “Padmé,” he said, his breath still carrying with it a slight wheeze, despite all the reconstructive lung surgeries and implants. “I am only trying to help you. Everything I do, I do for you. To protect you.”

“I know.”

He left her then, but later he would return, when she was alone in her bedchamber at night.

She didn’t need to ask who was approaching, even in the dark, because she knew the sound of his footfalls and his breathing, masked or unmasked. And besides, no one else could enter her chambers like this.

She had told him once, and then again, many times, that he had destroyed her love for him. Effectively ended their marriage. Choked the life out of her trust in him.

It must make it all more painful, for him, she thought. When she caressed his exposed skin, whispered his name into his ear, told him that she needed him. That she would always need him by her side. The ghost of what they had once been, to each other, to the galaxy, was

always between them. It was the ghost of this love, she thought, which haunted her bed at night. A warm, breathing ghost, with mechanical hands to grip her tight and scarred lips to kiss her own.

He would always leave her, in silence, at the end, and that night was no different. He could not sleep in her bed. He needed his own special accommodations to sleep. He could not lose consciousness while reclining, without ceasing to breathe in the middle of the night, or waking up choking on fluid that had built up in his artificial lungs, or being unable to stand the phantom pains that stiffened his limbs. He would often sleep suspended in a soothing bacta solution, held in place upright and aided with a breathing mask, his prosthetics removed to be cleaned and tuned by his array of personal helper droids.

No amount of affection between them would change these facts of his condition, but she always felt double the loneliness when he left her bed. She wanted to fall asleep wrapped in the comfort of his arms, the way she had once done, so many years ago.

But that was a different Padmé. A different Anakin. It was the cruel ghost of these naive lovers that held Empress Amidala and Lord Vader together, and she could not forget that.

When Mara and the senate delegation returned from the far reaches of the Outer Rim, they brought back a message that the Jedi would like to send a delegation of their own back to Coruscant to meet with the Empress and discuss the future relationship between her regime and the rebuilt Jedi Order.

Padmé accepted the request, though Anakin was insistent that this was an obvious ploy to get close enough to her to attack. He warned that allowing the Jedi envoy entry into Coruscant would result in an attempt to overthrow her, to kill him, to bring everything crashing down so that the Jedi could retake their old Temple and regain control of the core worlds.

“That is the exact opposite of what Mara reported were their wishes,” Padmé said, unimpressed by his paranoia. “They only want to rebuild their order in peace, focusing inward to study the Force, and specifically said that they had chosen to eschew the core worlds and the reach of the Empire, because becoming too mired in the politics of the Republic is what lead to the old order’s downfall.”

“Yes, that’s what they say, but don’t believe it. The Jedi Order has stood for ten thousand years. They are not going to let one disaster change their entire way of doing things.”

“I will take your worries under advisement, but I am going to meet with them.”

She did not think that what he said could be true. She was a friend to the Jedi. She had parted ways with Obi-Wan and Yoda as allies, her on her mission to destroy the Emperor and them on their way to search for survivors. She trusted them, and they trusted her.

She could not have known that they were there to destroy her, anyway. Just not in the way Anakin expected.

Chapter 4

*Yes I know that love is like ghosts
And what ain't living can never really die
You don't want me baby please don't lie
But if you're leaving, I gotta know why*

"Is he my son?"

Padmé stood at the window, looking out at the bustling Coruscanti skyline. The planet teemed with life, as always. It seemed strange that the world outside should continue on while hers was crashing down.

"He is."

"You lied to me. You lied to me for all these years." She did not look back, but she could see his reflection in the window as he paced. She did not need to be a Jedi to sense his anger, his feeling of betrayal.

"All this time, our child was alive. And you gave him to Obi-Wan! To Obi-Wan, of all people. You could not have thought of a way to hurt me more, Padmé."

"It was not done to hurt you."

"Wasn't it? You wanted to punish me for disappointing you, so you came back here, with your lies! Telling me I had a daughter, that I killed her, that... that you could never forgive me. And I believed you! I ate it right out of your hand." He stopped dead in his tracks, and it made her skin prickle.

"Why did you come back? Why did you do it? Why didn't you just run away with Obi-Wan?"

She turned around to face him. "The children had to be protected from the Emperor. And from you. I knew that you were looking for me, that eventually you would find us. I made a choice. Run with my children tied to my back, or give them to others who could keep them safe, and return to you."

"You came back so that you could kill Palpatine," said Anakin. "So that we could kill Palpatine together."

"Yes. And I told you that... I did not lie about that."

"I've been a fool." He sat down and put his head in his hands. She had feared that he would strike out at her, had even been prepared for it. For him to call her a liar and choke her until she fell at his feet. This time, he wouldn't even be wrong.

"I allowed myself to think that you came back for me," he said, voice muffled in his hands. "I let myself dream that you still loved me, still believe there was good in me. But I've been nothing more than a tool to you. Just like the Emperor. Just like the Jedi."

"I gave up my children to save you!" she said, harshly, her composure cracking.

"And you call this saving me?" he shot back. Then, "Wait. Children?"

Blast it.

She took a deep breath. He stood up and took a few long steps over to her. "Children?" he repeated.

"There were twins," she said. "A boy and a girl."

"Both survived?"

She nodded.

"And you gave them both to Obi-Wan?"

She shook her head. Why lie, now? Obi-Wan had come back to Coruscant, with her son in tow, prepared to out her to Anakin. He could not have thought it would end any other way, since he had not even bothered to disguise Luke's name.

"It was too dangerous to keep the twins together. I sent the girl... I sent Leia to live on Alderaan."

"The princess? Mara's friend?" he said, incredulous.

"Yes."

"She is our daughter?"

She steeled herself. "Not anymore. I gave her up. She is an Organa now."

"I didn't give her up. She is still *my* daughter."

"But you did give her up," Padmé insisted. She raised herself to her tallest and gave him a defiant look. "You gave up your right to fatherhood when you betrayed everyone. Obi-Wan, the Jedi, me. When you murdered younglings!"

"That did not give you the right to—"

"I always had the right," she said darkly. "A mother's right to protect her children. Yes, it is true, I told you a lie when I said that you had killed our child. But you might as well have! And after that, how could I trust you? How could I place the lives of my children in your hands? How could I know that you wouldn't murder them if they made you angry? And what of the Emperor? Did you expect me to return to you while you were in his service, and place my helpless infants at his mercy?"

"You should have told me that they lived, that you had sent them into hiding to protect them from the Emperor. Then when he was dead we could have gotten them back."

"You're not listening. I didn't *trust you* with that, Anakin. I couldn't."

He nodded grimly. “No, I do hear you. And you’re right. We never could trust each other. Not even from the start, not even in the good days. Were they even good? Or have I invented them in my memory, lies I told myself so that I could live with... all this?”

She found that she couldn’t answer, because that question had haunted her as well. Was it all a shared self-delusion? Their love? Their marriage? It was all tarnished now, tarnished by the death and the mistrust and the secrecy.

“Never mind,” he said with a shake of his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I loved you,” she blurted. “I still do. I love you. I do.”

“Love is useless. Look where it has gotten us.”

He turned away and was about to leave without another word.

“Where are you going?” she demanded, following him as fast as her feet would carry her.

“I can’t do this anymore. I have to leave.”

“And go where?”

“I don’t know. Anywhere but here. The galaxy is a vast place, Padmé. Perhaps I’ll fly into a star, and we can all be rid of this pain.”

“Don’t say that,” she said, grabbing his arm. “Don’t ever say that.”

He shook himself free. “My entire life I’ve been lied to by everyone I ever cared about. I want to be alone. Finally. It’s all that I want.”

“Will you tell them? Luke and Leia? Will you tell them the truth?” Padmé asked, fearfully.

“Is there a point? They’re strangers to me.”

There was doubt in his voice, though.

“It would destroy their lives,” said Padmé, “to know the truth.”

“Or perhaps it will answer a great many questions they have about themselves,” said Anakin. ‘Perhaps it will set them free, as it has done for me.’ He turned his back to her. “But I will leave that up to you. You are their mother, and you make all the decisions about their fates, as you have made abundantly clear.”

“Anakin, don’t leave. Please. Come back to me. There will be no more lies.”

He just shook his head and walked away from her, and when he got to his chambers, he locked the door behind him, and there was nothing she could do to make the door open again.

Chapter 5

*I want ours to be an endless song
Baby in my eyes you can do no wrong*

The young senator from Alderaan headed the committee that approached Empress Amidala with their Petition to Restore the Republic.

Padmé sat at her desk, in her office, looking at the delegates before her.

And so, I am Palpatine now, and my daughter stands before me, a ghost of my former self, she thought, the irony not lost on her.

She had allowed, even passively encouraged, many bills to be put forth before the senate which curbed her powers, making her ever the more ceremonial as the years went by. This was the final movement to make it utterly official, to strip her of all power, name, rank.

“There can be no room for empire in a free society,” said Senator Organa, in one of her speeches before the senate. “Empress Amidala is beloved by all, but her power lies in her compassion, her willingness to listen to and work with others. And yet, in the hands of anyone else, such power could and has been wielded for evil purposes. I am too young to remember the dark days when Emperor Palpatine held our galaxy in an iron grip and silenced any dissent or free speech with violence. This is what ‘Empire’ means to many. This is what it means to the remnants of the Jedi Order, who faced near complete extinction just two decades ago. This petition is to ensure that the New Republic, as we shall call it, reinstates the checks and balances which disappeared under Palpatine’s reign. I am confident that Empress Amidala will agree to cede the title and implication of absolute power that this position grants. Going forward, we shall focus on free elections, and leaders who have been installed by the will of the people, and not rely on the chance benevolence of dictatorship.”

It made her proud, even as she was being pushed out of her office, as all her accomplishments for peace and freedom were being lumped in with Palpatine’s evil machinations.

It was Leia who handed her the stylus, standing by her desk, and she picked it up and signed the datapad. She signed *Padmé Naberrie Amidala Skywalker*, and applied the electronic stamp of the Empress, then pressed her thumb to the screen, adding the print to make it official.

She handed the pad back and Leia looked down at the long handwritten name, frowning a little. The Empress had never used the name Skywalker before, in any capacity, and such an irregularity did not go unnoticed by the eagle-eyed girl. But the thumb-print and the stamp of the Empress made it official enough, so she said nothing, just furrowed her eyebrows a little.

Padmé knew that she would think on this, and would ask her father, Bail Organa, what it meant later. And it would be up to him to tell her. She hoped that he would tell her the truth, but she wanted Leia to hear it from someone she loved and trusted.

After the full transfer of power back to the senate, Padmé got in her personal spaceship, still a Nubian model out of respect and deference to her home planet, and traveled far to the Outer Rim where the new Jedi Order was gathered.

She was still upset with Obi-Wan for bring Luke to Coruscant, forcing the truth out into the open, or at least, forcing the truth upon her and Anakin. As far as she knew, Luke had no idea what significance his presence at the meeting of the New Jedi Order and the Amidala Empire had had. Few people knew Lord Vader's true identity, and Luke had clearly not been one of them.

But she could not now find it in her to hold a grudge against Obi-Wan. It had been time, past time, perhaps, for Anakin to learn the truth. Obi-Wan had kept Luke safe, and she had killed the Emperor. That was the deal they had made with each other, all those years ago, when she announced her intention to return to Anakin's side, and to begin her dangerous lie.

Obi-Wan showed her around the Temple, and everyone there peered at her curiously, as if wanting to see what an Empress who had willingly signed away all her power looked like.

"As you can see, a lot of things have changed," said Obi-Wan. "We now have an entire village attached to the temple, where families of Jedi recruits live. We even have some second generation Jedi, now. Not all families accompany their children or loved ones to the Temple Village, of course. Some have lives they do not wish to leave elsewhere. But all are free to visit."

"All this change, because of Anakin and me," she said. "I mean..."

"It's hard to rebuild an entire order from the bare minimum," said Obi-Wan. "We need the support of everyone we can get. Force users and non-Force-sensitives alike. We are part of the community here."

He paused, as they came upon an old man seated in meditation. "Isn't that right, Mace?" Obi-Wan asked.

The man opened one eye. The other was covered by a patch. He had a full head and beard of snow white hair, but looking closely at him, Padmé could recognize that man who had once been second in command of the Jedi Order. He stood up and nodded to her, and she noticed that he only had one arm, and did not even bother with a prosthetic. "Senator Amidala," he said. "It's been a long time."

"Master Windu," she gasped. "I thought—"

"I was dead?" he supplied. 'So did I.' And then he laughed, which was strange but heartwarming. She had always remembered him as somewhat grim and foreboding. But he had the rousing laughter of a sudden burst of sunshine through the clouds, and it was a healing sound. "Turns out it takes more than a lightsaber to the arm, some Force lightning, and a drop from a hundred story building to kill this Jedi. Knocked me off my feet for a good long while, but I managed."

"Master Windu... I... I'm so sorry," said Padmé, suddenly remembering her shame.

"You have nothing to apologize for. You did nothing to me," he said, his tone turned serious.

"But it was my husband... Anakin..."

"Your husband can apologize for his own actions. Point of fact, he already has."

"What?" Her eyes widened. "Anakin... is here?"

"No," said Obi-Wan gently. "But he was, some time ago. He did not stay long. The Jedi teach forgiveness, but all the forgiveness of the Force cannot heal some wounds entirely. But he knew that. He could not stay here. Though he went with my blessing, which is I think what he came here to find."

Padmé could not stop her mouth from gaping. "He came here, not to fight you?"

Obi-Wan nodded to Mace, who nodded back knowingly before he sat back down to resume his meditation. Obi-Wan steered Padmé along on the path. "I am not sure what he all intended, as he approached this place," he said. "But Anakin is... changed. He seems to have lost his anger, and it is replaced with a great sadness. He seemed to me a man defeated, Padmé. And while I cannot say I was hoping for a fight, it did pain me some to see the fire go out of him."

He paused, shook his head, said, "Forgive my wording."

"What did he say to you?"

"Not much, really. He wanted to see Luke, but he did not want me to tell Luke who he was. Not the truth. He was no longer wearing his disguise as Darth Vader, but he did not want me to introduce him as Anakin Skywalker, either. You see, I've always told Luke the true identity of his father, but I was... liberal with my account of how his father came to his end. Luke thinks that his father was killed at the end of the war, with the rest of the Jedi who were cut down by the clones."

"And his mother?"

Obi-Wan shrugged, and smiled slightly. "Some poor girl whose name I never had the privilege to know."

"Will he be very angry to know that he's been lied to?"

"That I cannot say. Luke has something of his father in him, an impatience that I remember well, but he is not quick to rage, and has a gentle, friendly nature. He is loved by everyone who knows him. He reminds me quite a bit of his mother."

"You do me too much credit. I'm not the girl I was."

"Then think of Luke as having some of the best qualities of the girl that was," Obi-Wan said.

She sighed. "I came here to find Luke," she told him. "To tell him the truth, if you hadn't already. I never expected Anakin to have come here... unless it was to try to kill you and forcibly abscond with Luke."

“Anakin was very interested in Luke, but he said that you did not want the boy to know the truth, and that he would respect your wishes.”

“I wanted to see if Luke would... if he could find it in his best interests... to help me.”

“Help you?”

“I’m looking for Anakin. We parted on very bad terms, after he discovered the truth. I thought, perhaps, if Luke were with me, he would see me again.” She shook her head. “It sounds so selfish when I say it out loud. I wanted Luke to have his life, to be happy, and not be weighed down by the sins of his parents. But I... goddesses, Obi-Wan, I miss Anakin. I miss him so much. We hurt each other for years, but it was good once. There was love once. And I... I am tired of the secrets and the lies. I want my children to know who I am, I want their father back. Am I wrong?”

“I’m not one to tell you whether you are wrong or right,” said Obi-Wan. ‘But I understand your pain. I have missed Anakin too, these many years. I wished he could have stayed here, but it was not to be. Not while we are still trying to rebuild from the destruction he helped to cause. But Padmé,’ he put a kind hand on her shoulder, “You did a great thing by bringing the Emperor down. And you did an even greater thing still, by relinquishing your power in the name of freedom and democracy. I don’t know of many others who would have done the same in your place. Do not be overly hard on yourself for the sacrifices you had to make.”

She smiled thinly. “If it had been anyone besides Leia holding out that stylus, I am not sure I would have let it go. Or if Anakin had not left me... well, Obi-Wan, the promise of living out my days as the Lonely Empress was not as appealing to me as you might think.”

“Come,” he said, smiling. “We will find Luke, and you may speak to him.”

When they found Luke, he was sitting and reading with Mara Jade at his side. It surprised Padmé, but in retrospect, it should not have. Mara had left Coruscant shortly after Anakin. She had taken his departure very hard, because he had not said goodbye or told her where he was going. Without him, Mara must have felt her place in the Palace to be a very precarious one, because not long afterwards she had announced to Padmé that she was leaving to join up with the Jedi, to study their ways and devote herself to the Force, giving up on any aspirations she had held of being Heir Apparent to the Empire.

She looked at Padmé with a guarded, suspicious look, and Padmé felt a pang of remorse. She had always resented the girl for taking up the place in Anakin’s life where his own children should have belonged, pushing her own guilt and unhappiness at the situation onto Mara. She knew this. She had always known it.

She didn’t know if she could ever explain it to Mara. She had never been outright hostile or abusive to the girl, she could never have done that to an innocent child... but she had been cold, and suspicious, and refused to show the motherly deference to Mara that Anakin had so clearly wished and pushed for. It must have been hard, she knew, for Mara to grow up sensing all that negative energy, and not knowing why.

“Mara, child, may we have a moment alone with Luke?” Obi-Wan asked, and Mara nodded obediently. She even gave Padmé a bow, like she had as a girl growing up in the

Palace, before she remembered herself and straightened up, blushing angrily at the habit of memory. Then she scampered off, glancing back over her shoulder as she went.

Luke watched her go, then looked back to Obi-Wan and Padmé, his open face a picture of confusion.

“Luke,” she said. “Hello.”

He stood up, setting his book aside, and mimicked the bow Mara had done just moments before. “Em-Empress Amidala,” he stuttered. “I had no idea you were coming here. H-hello. What brings you here?” He winced at his own words.

“I’ve come to see you, Luke.”

“Me?” he echoed, incredulous.

“Yes. I have some things to tell you. They will be hard to hear. So first, I want to tell you that I’m sorry, and I hope that you will be able to forgive me someday. But I will understand if you cannot.”

“Well, that’s good, because I sure don’t. I mean, understand.”

“Luke... Obi-Wan tells me that you never knew your mother.”

He glanced at Obi-Wan, who nodded encouragingly. “That’s right. I never knew her name.”

She held out her hand, and after a moment of looking at it curiously, he took it, and looked into her eyes, his head cocked to the side.

“Luke, I am your mother.”

He smiled nervously. “Ah... I think you’re mistaken. You see, aren’t you married to... Darth Vader?” He made a face as he said the name.

“Yes,” she said. “Lord Vader is my husband. And your father.”

“Well, no,” he laughed, shaking his head. He pulled his hand away. He looked at Obi-Wan, then back to her. “I think you’ve got me mixed up with someone else. See, my father was Anakin Skywalker. A Jedi. So...”

She looked to Obi-Wan for help.

“Search your feelings, Luke,” said Obi-Wan. “She is telling the truth.”

“But—”

“And so was I, after a fashion. Lord Vader and Anakin Skywalker are one in the same person.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry, Luke. I know this is hard to hear. It was kept from you to protect you. But now you are grown, and old enough to know the full truth. This is your mother, a very old and dear friend of mine. Like your father was.”

"I'm sorry," Luke said, with a strained laugh. He waved his hands and backed up. 'Um, I have to go.' He looked at Padmé and she thought for a moment that he was going to throw up. But he just repeated, "I have to go," and then turned around and ran off in the direction Mara had gone.

"Well," said Obi-Wan. "I think that went well."

Padmé sat down and covered her face with her hands. "He despises me," she moaned.

"He doesn't know you. But he will. He'll come around. You just have to give him a moment to adjust."

She lifted her head and nodded. "Even if he never wants to speak to me again, I'm glad that he has all of you. All of this," she said, looking around at the Jedi Temple Village. It was very different from the hallowed halls of the Coruscant Temple. She liked the look of it, she liked that her son had grown up here, with a large, loving family. How very different it would have been to have brought him to Coruscant with her, tried to shield him from the darkness there. He would have grown up lonely and desperate for the love of broken parents. Like Mara had.

"He will want to speak to you," said Obi-Wan. "And, once the shock wears off, he will want to find his father. I think he will help you, Padmé."

She looked far off at a distant farm field, where workers were overseeing agriculture droids. "I wonder where he is," she said. "I think of him all the time... out there... all alone. He said that he wanted to be alone, but I can't quite believe it. Anakin was never meant to be alone. It's not good for him. I'm not good for him, either, but..."

"Actually," Obi-Wan said, "I can set your mind somewhat at ease. I happen to know that Anakin is not alone."

"What?"

"Well, he came here, and he left, but he did not leave alone. Ahsoka went with him."

"Ahsoka!"

"Yes. She had about the same impression as you did. She said something about not leaving him again, and that she feared he would suffocate himself in the dark void of space if left to his own devices."

Padmé found that she was crying, but she laughed through her tears, saying, "That sounds like something Ahsoka would say."

"Indeed."

She wiped at her eyes. "Maybe... maybe I shouldn't do this. He's not alone. Maybe it's for the best. All we've ever done is hurt each other and cause grief. I don't know if we can ever come back from the lies and the mistrust. It's enough to know that Ahsoka is looking after him. I—"

"Padmé." Obi-Wan laid a hand on top of hers. "I like to think that I have gained some wisdom over the years, and I have learned that we are none of us an island, meant to be forever alone. We need each other. And I cannot speak to everything that you have done,

every harsh word spoken or lie told... but I know that you are a good person, and that you have done everything to protect your children and save the galaxy from a great evil. You are one of the most admirable women I have had the pleasure to have known. You deserve to find some measure of happiness in this life. If Anakin wants nothing more to do with you, you cannot force him. But that boy... listen, Padmé, that boy loves you more than life itself. I always saw it. Everyone with eyes could always see it. And I still saw it when he was here, last.”

He smiled, patted her hand, and let go.

“All this is to say: I do not think it would hurt to try again. Just this once.”

At that moment she felt something like real hope, for the first time in a very long time. “Thank you, Obi-Wan,” she said. “For everything.”

“It’s my pleasure. Now... it’s just about tea time. Let’s worry about the future after we’ve had something to eat.”

Chapter 6

*Yes I know that love is like ghosts
Few have seen it, but everybody talks
Spirits follow everywhere I go
They sing all day and they haunt me in the night
I sing all day and I love you through the night*

“And where would you want me to go?”

It was an invitation just as it was a challenge. She looked into his eyes, still subconsciously always checking for blue, not yellow. But she thought his eyes were tired, very tired, now. The medical attention he needed could not be adequately gotten, the way he and Ahsoka traveled around the galaxy, looking for what exactly, neither of them could tell her.

Anakin said he was counting the stars, going to every star system he had yet to visit, before he died.

“You are only forty-one,” she had said. “Why are you talking about dying?”

“It takes a long time to visit all the star systems. There are some that aren’t even on the star charts.

“Besides,” he added, “I’m not afraid to die. I’ve been dying a little bit ever since you came back into my life.”

“It made more sense,” she said, reaching out for his hand, “when I said it.”

“Tell yourself that.”

Then he asked her, “And where would you want me to go?”

She thought for a moment. It hadn’t really been part of her plan. She had just wanted to find him, to have Luke know his father, to know them both. She had wanted him to say that he was done running away and wanted to come back to her.

“I thought, perhaps, Naboo,” she said. “The lake country.”

“You want to recapture the past.”

“The good parts.”

He sighed, and she thought that the wheeze was worse. He paused for a moment to lift a respirator to his mouth and inhale deeply, then he dropped it back to its clip at his belt. “These replacement lungs you had them install aren’t holding up to wear and tear very well,” he said, dryly, then coughed a little.

"It was the best medical technology could do," she said, frowning.

"I know. I know. Everything always had to be the best. It was the only thing that ever gave me hope... that you might still love me. Though sometimes I thought you just wanted to keep me up and running because I was useful, if despicable."

Padmé bit her lip and looked down. "I did love you. But I was afraid to show it, to feel it. I did want to punish you, for what you'd done to me. To us."

He was quiet, and she felt the unspoken question between them. *Can we ever forgive each other for the hurt that we've caused? Can we ever come back from that darkness?*

"I spent years trying to win back your love, to earn your forgiveness," Anakin said, finally. "Then, when I learned that my child... my *children*... were not dead, it broke me. I was so angry to realize that I was seeking forgiveness for something that had not happened. All I could do was leave."

"I know." She nodded. "You said that the truth had set you free... and I knew that you meant, free of me. But I felt free too, in a way. Free of having to live with the pain of trying to believe my own story, to convince myself that the lie was the truth, that they were dead, and you had killed them. Once it was out there, I could finally breathe again." She paused. "I hoped," she told him, "that you would come back. That once your anger over the children subsided, that you would come back to me. That we could make things up to each other, somehow. But then you never came home."

"Maybe... I was hoping that you would keep following me. Chase me down. Beg me to come back."

She laughed, despite herself. "Isn't that what I'm doing right now?"

"I suppose it is. And I'm trying to pretend that it's not the only thing I've ever wanted..." He laughed, and then coughed, and looked up the ridge to where Ahsoka and Luke were trying, not very convincingly, to look as if they were not eavesdropping.

"It's not too late," she said, cautiously, looking that way as well, "to stop pretending."

He touched her face, caressing the hair that had come free at her temples, and said, "Can we make it work? This time?"

She reached up to cover his hand with her own. "I don't know... but I know that we can try."

"There is no try," he mused. "Only do, or do not..."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nevermind. That never made much sense to me, anyway. I think that we can try." He squeezed her hand. "I want to try, again."

End